

# BOYS' LIFE

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# CONTENTS

OCTOBER 1973

## ARTICLES

8 Penn State's Unsung, Upside-down Star  
 Robert G. Deindorfer  
 26 Do We Really Care About Our Environment?  
 Martin Cohen  
 30 The Greatest Show on Earth  
 Stanley Pashko

## FICTION

34 Flasher Fever  
 Jack Ritchie  
 38 Galloping Wind  
 Zoltan Malocsay

## CARTOON FEATURES

52 Pee Wee Harris  
 55 Willy  
 55 The Romance of Words  
 54 Pedro Patrol  
 53 The Religious Emblems Programs—In the Name of God  
 53 Tracy Twins  
 56 Scouts In Action

## REGULAR FEATURES

4 Hitchin' Rack  
 12 Making the Scene  
 Stan Pashko  
 15 Conservation  
 George Laycock  
 18 Checkmate  
 Larry Evans  
 22 Autos  
 Ed Janicki  
 24 Hobby Hows  
 Glenn Wagner  
 25 Movies  
 Richard and Aljean Harmetz  
 42 Growing Up  
 Louis Sabin  
 60 Stamps and Coins  
 Harry D. Thorsen, Jr.  
 76 Gifts and Gimmicks  
 82 Think and Grin

## SPECIAL FEATURES

44 Family Living  
 Jan Steenblik  
 46 Your Genius Kit  
 48 Genius at Work  
 50 Handy Belt Pack  
 51 Throw the Block—Fight It Off  
 58 The Lowdown on Home Upkeep  
 Glenn Wagner  
 68 Chuck-wagon Burgerboard  
 John Taylor  
 72 Tropical Fish  
 Billie Spencer  
 81 New Life for Old Bottles  
 G.J. Gray

## 57 PROGRAM HELPS



Page 26

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Page 8



Page 25



Page 34



Page 38

Scouting today's a lot more than you think



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# Flasher Fever

By JACK RITCHIE

*A fellow could get killed playing the new school chess champion.*

**I**t all has to start somewhere and in my case it began when I missed the regular 3:15 school bus home because I was fooling around in the gym too long.

So I had to wait for one of the late buses that leave at five o'clock. They're the ones that pick up the kids who went to their different club meetings and other extracurricular activities.

That's how come I was drinking from the bubbler and otherwise killing time when Mr. Beardsley, who's my chemistry teacher, stepped out of his classroom and looked up and down the hall.

He saw me. "Theodore, do you play chess?"

"Sure," I said. "Sometimes, when it rains."

He seemed satisfied with that. "At least you know the fundamentals. I wonder if you'd help us out. The Student Chess Club is having its annual club tournament. We have 14 members and we need 16 in order to round things out, so to speak. From 16 we can conveniently eliminate to eight, then to four, and finally down to two for the finals."

The idea of chess didn't exactly stir my blood, but I'm a C-minus student and can't afford to antagonize anybody in power, so I said, "Be glad to."

Besides, I didn't have any place to go until five o'clock anyway.

But that still made only 15 and Mr. Beardsley needed one more warm body. That turned out to be Boho Stevens, who came wandering down the hall because he'd missed his bus too and Mr. Beardsley nailed him.

So we went into Mr. Beardsley's classroom and joined the club. We drew names out of a hat to see who would play who in the first round and as it happened I got Boho.

We sat down at one of the boards and commenced playing chess.

Mr. Beardsley, who was refereeing the matches or whatever, wandered from board to board. He stopped to watch me and Boho make a few moves, then he

sighed and moved on to the real players.

Anyway, I beat old Boho and the whole game took us only 20 minutes.

Everybody else was still playing when we finished. As a matter of fact it looked to me like some of them had barely started.

So Boho and I sat down in the back of the room and talked football and things.

"They don't draw much of a crowd here," Boho said.

He couldn't have been more right. There wasn't any crowd at all. Just the players.

Finally, close to five, they all finished and as I was leaving, Mr. Beardsley said, "Theodore, we'll expect you back next Wednesday. After all, you did win your match with Stevens. Next week, however, you're up against Joe Harrington and that ought to be the end of it."

I would have said enough is enough, but like I mentioned, Mr. Beardsley is my chemistry teacher and I need all the good will I can get.

When Wednesday rolled around I showed up in Mr. Beardsley's room after school to play Joe Harrington, only Joe wasn't there. It seems like he caught rubella from his small brother and wouldn't be in school for a while.

"However, we'll see you next week, Theodore," Mr. Beardsley said. "Since Harrington couldn't make it, he automatically forfeits the match and that puts you in the semifinals of the tournament."

The next morning I saw that the bulletin boards carried a small notice about the chess-club tournament and there was my name, Theodore Flasher, up with the other three semifinalists.

Mary Lou Sullivan, who's our top cheerleader, sort of fluttered her eyes when she met me in the corridor. "I didn't know that you played chess. I al-

ways thought of you as just another football player."

Just another football player? If she'd look at the statistics, she'd discover that I'm the twelfth leading all-time ground-gainer for a junior in our league.

She flapped her eyes again. "You must have to be terribly good to get into the semifinals. I play a little chess myself. What do you think of the Sicilian Defense?"

I rubbed my jaw. "Some like it, some don't."

She nodded earnestly. "Gee, I never really thought about it that way before."

In my solid geometry class, Boho said, "So Joe Harrington got rubella?"

I shrugged. "It's really the old Flasher Fever, Boho. Once Joe knew he'd have to face me, fang and claw, he played with his little brother until he got rubella and could cop out."

Mr. Swenson, who's our football coach, took me aside in the afternoon. "I didn't know you played chess." He frowned a little. "I don't want you straining yourself, Ted. Save something for the football season."

"How could I strain myself playing chess?"

He tapped his forehead. "I mean strain the brain. Don't get it all cluttered up with miscellaneous things. Save room for the team and the school."

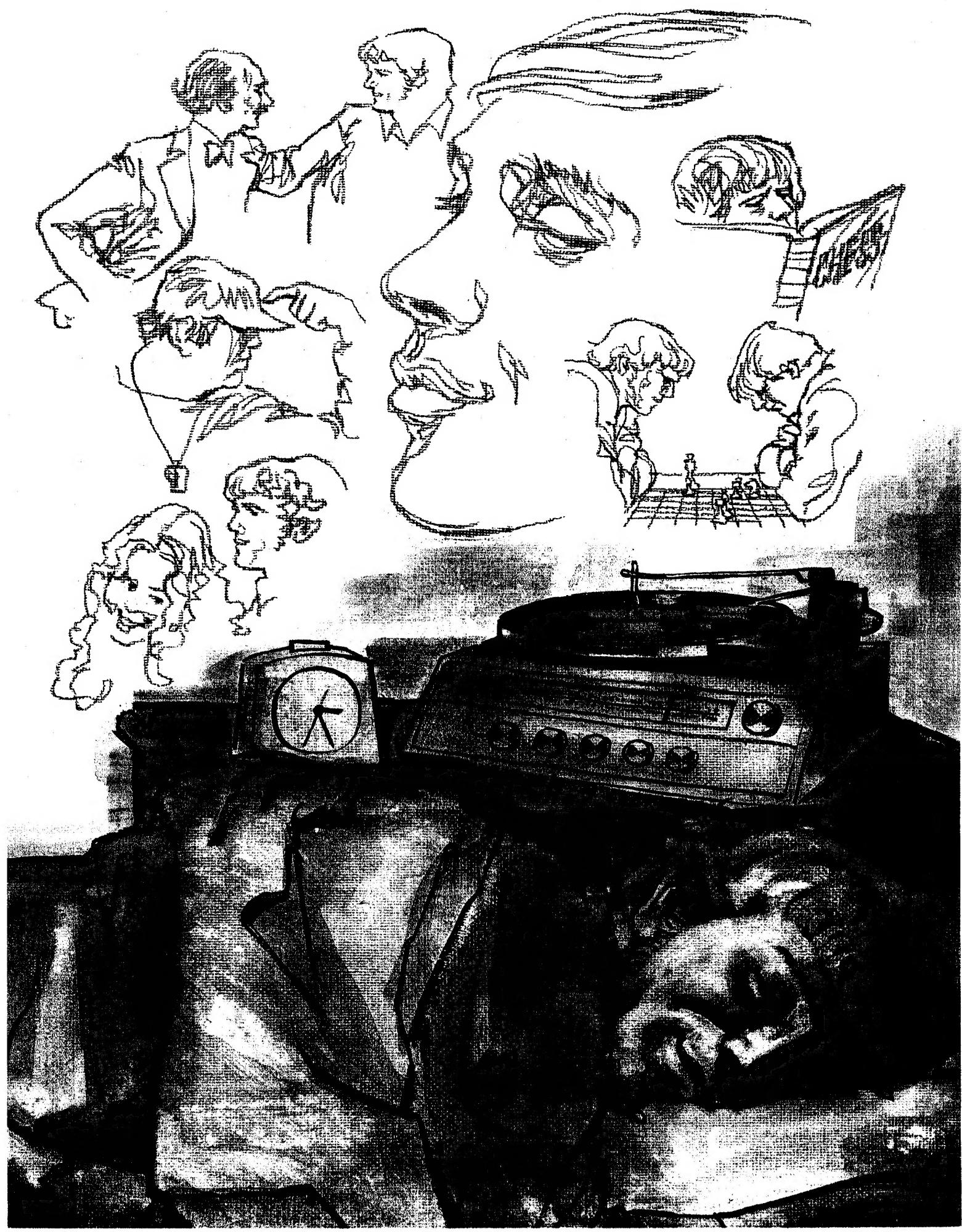
That evening I took a chess book out of the library and brought it home.

I read through some of it and then rooted through my closet until I found my old chess set. One of the Rooks was missing, but I looked around and came up with a big cork that I could use as a substitute.

After supper I played a match with my dad. He conceded after



*All night, as I slept, the record played to imprint Bobby Fischer games on my unconscious.*



## Hoodoo, jinx, accident,

I wore him down to a King and a Bishop and I had a King, a Bishop, and the cork.

When I got to Mr. Beardsley's room on Wednesday, there was a small crowd waiting, like Mary Lou, Boho Stevens, the football coach, and half a dozen guys from the football team. They whistled when I came into the room and Mr. Beardsley glared them down.

Then he turned to me. "You were scheduled to meet Elmer Czernic today. However, Elmer's father was transferred to another town and the family, including Elmer, of course, had to leave immediately. Elmer thereby forfeits the game and that automatically puts you in the finals, which will be played next week."

I sat down in the audience and watched Fred Saddler and Jerome Canti play their own semifinal match.

Boho whispered in my ear. "The Flasher Fever worked again?"

I nodded. "Elmer got the shakes so bad his whole family had to leave town quick. I wouldn't be surprised if Elmer is talking to a psychiatrist right this minute trying to get his old confidence back."

Coach Swenson sat on my right. "Maybe I'll try you at quarterback next year. I never figured you for brains."

Jerome Canti won the match with that tricky left-handed style of his.

All week long people kept stopping me—even on the street—and asking me whether it was really me in the chess finals at school.

Wednesday came and when I turned into the corridor for Mr. Beardsley's room, I heard all this buzzing of people.

Mr. Beardsley met me at the door. "I'll say one thing for you, Theodore, you certainly draw crowds."

He escorted me to the chessboard, which was already set up at one end of the room, only Jerome Canti hadn't shown up yet.

So we all sat there—waiting for Lefty.

Around 4:15, one of the office girls came trotting in and handed Mr. Beardsley a note.

He read it and closed his eyes for a few seconds. "I have an unfortunate announcement to make. Immediately after his last class, Jerome rushed home to retrieve the good-luck charm that he had forgotten to bring to school today, and while on that errand he was seized with a sudden pain in his right side. At the moment he is in the hospital, receiving the best of care, and scheduled for an appendix operation."

Mr. Beardsley looked at me and sighed. "Since Jerome has failed to make an appearance, he forfeits the game, and I hereby declare you, Theodore Flasher, the winner of this tournament."

There were a lot of cheers from the audience and people rushed up to shake my hand. Mary Lou even asked for my autograph.

That Friday, in the school auditorium, the principal announced that I had won the chess championship and there was a lot of applause and I had to stand up and get red in the face.

I thought that would be the end of the whole crazy thing, but it wasn't.

The principal had another announcement, which was that Riverside High, our arch-rival in just about everything, had also had a chess tournament. And Riverside High had issued a challenge—their champ against ours, which was me, of course.





The door at the other end of the auditorium opened and there stood Wilbur, on crutches.

## bad luck, flasher fever.

When I saw Mr. Beardsley next, he started talking first. "Your opponent will be Wilbur Iverson. He's a senior and I understand that he is the first student in the history of the United States to win a chess scholarship to college, M.I.T. or Brandeis, I believe."

"Look, Mr. Beardsley," I said. "I really don't know a thing about chess. I'd better just withdraw."

"Nonsense," he said. "I saw the way you defeated Boho Stevens. Your apparently careless, sloppy attack was actually a brilliant, precise, daring offense—once you think it over carefully."

He smiled wisely. "And I've heard all about the Flasher Fever. I understand that Harrington never played with his younger brother until he was scheduled to meet you. And as for Jerome Canti and his so-called 'appendicitis,' I wouldn't be at all surprised if he could have put off the operation for weeks."

I sighed. "What about Elmer Czernic moving out of town?"

"He certainly could have talked his father out of it if he had really wanted to. After all, what is a promotion worth if you have to move away from here?" He patted my shoulder. "Yes, sirree, Ted. We'll hand Riverside a thrashing, one way or another."

I got my first look at Wilbur Iverson when we met in Mr. Beardsley's classroom a few days later to make the match arrangements.

Wilbur was tall and thin and he frowned a lot, mostly suspiciously. He looked over Mr. Beardsley's room. "When we play, I must insist that the first three rows of seats be cleared of spectators."

Mr. Beardsley rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. "Actually I don't think the match should be played right here. Interest in chess seems to have reached something of a fever pitch and I thought that possibly we ought to transfer the contest to the school auditorium."

Wilbur agreed. "I demand silence when I play. There will be no rattling of candy-bar wrappers or eating of potato chips, especially the louder varieties."

I thought I'd throw in a condition too. "The board must be absolutely level. When I played the great Boho Stevens, his side of the board was higher than mine and I had to play uphill all the way."

"And I must have my own personal chair," Wilbur said.

For a wild second I wondered whether I could bug it with an electric buzzer—or even a couple of tacks.

"I must approve the lighting," Wilbur said. "I cannot concentrate on my game if it is too dim or too bright."

"What about television, radio, movie, and comic-strip rights?" I asked. "And while we're at it, why not charge admission?"

There was a pretty long silence while they thought that over.

Wilbur spoke. "Why not charge admission? After all, basketball and football games aren't free."

Mr. Beardsley went along with him. "Those football people keep harping on the fact that their gate receipts finance the school's entire athletic program. You wouldn't believe the difficulty I had in prying enough out of the budget just so that our club could order a new board and a set of chessmen." (Continued on page 62) →

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## Flasher Fever

→ (Continued from page 37)

Wilbur was a realist. "We might have difficulty in filling the auditorium if we played a series of matches, but why not just one game? The whole ball of wax? I'm sure we could get a full house. And our schools would split the take, 50-50."

That more or less did it. Now I couldn't back out of the match—no way—without it costing the school money.

Wilbur studied me and smiled economically. "By the way, I've heard all about the Flasher Fever, and I am not at all susceptible. I have already had rubella, my father is well and permanently established in Riverside, and I have had my appendix removed."

He turned to leave and walked into the open door.

I helped pick him up and it looked to me like he was going to get a black eye.

He covered that one with a handkerchief and stared at me with the other. Then he stalked out, very carefully.

Two nights later, after supper, Mr. Beardsley showed up at our house carrying a briefcase. He talked to me privately.

"I have been to see Wilbur," he said. "Ostensibly to discuss with him various other aspects of the coming match, but actually to spy."

"And you saw something?"

"Exactly. I saw that Wilbur has an extensive library of chess books. In particular, I observed a volume of Fischer games, quite dog-eared and obviously well thumbed, on his desk. Evidently Fischer is one of Wilbur's favorite masters."

I tried to sound intelligent. "So?"

"The point is that every chess player has a certain style of play. An offense, a defense, and so forth. Therefore it occurred to me that if we studied Fischer,

we might possibly gain some knowledge of the type of play to expect from Wilbur. I made a note of the title of the Fischer book and found a copy in our downtown library."

"You brought the book with you?"

"Better than that. Do you have a record player?"

I pointed to it. "Right there."

He took a phonograph record out of his briefcase and put it on the machine.

I heard Mr. Beardsley's voice come from the record, saying, "New Jersey Open Championship, 1957. Fischer versus Sherwin. Fischer has the white. He moves P-K4. Sherwin moves P-QB4. Fischer, N-KB3; Sherwin, P-K3."

Mr. Beardsley turned down the volume. "I was able to have this pressed at the Acme Recording Studios. You will study the Fischer book during your conscious hours. And when you are asleep, this record will play itself over and over again all night long, etching Fischer games into the crevices of your unconscious mind."

When I saw Mr. Beardsley to the door downstairs, he stopped for half a minute more. "By the way, it seems that Wilbur tripped at school today while going down the up stairs and sprained his ankle."

I brightened a little. "Maybe he'd like to postpone the match? Or we could even call it off altogether."

"No," Mr. Beardsley said. "He is determined not to miss the match. Besides, he gets along quite well on those crutches." He put on his hat. "Wilbur also seems to have acquired a terrible cold."

That night I put the record on my phonograph, turned it low and lay down. I listened a few minutes and the next thing I knew I was asleep.

When I woke the next morning, the record was still going.



I turned it off and got dressed.

ON SATURDAY, Dad and Mom drove me to school for the match with Wilbur and I noticed that the entire parking lot was filled, so we had to find street parking and walk back two blocks.

When I reported to Mr. Beardsley, he took me to a small room on one side of the auditorium, where we would wait until game time.

I heard band music coming from the auditorium.

"We decided that prematch ceremonies would do no harm," Mr. Beardsley said. "The Riverside High band is out there too and will be given equal time."

He looked at his watch. "By the way, I learned that Wilbur was stung on the hand by a bee. Rather strange to see bees still around this time of the year."

After the bands finished, I heard Mary Lou Sullivan and her cheerleaders whipping up a frenzy.

When they were through, Mr. Beardsley and I left the room and went up the side stairs onto the auditorium stage. Applause and whistles broke out when I walked into sight and sat down at the table.

Wilbur wasn't there yet.

I looked the audience over. There was standing room only and the cheerleaders were up front sitting cross-legged on the floor. It seemed like half the audience was older people.

Above me they had rigged up this electric chessboard so that the audience could see just what moves the players were making.

So I waited.

Two o'clock, the time scheduled for the match to be-

gin, came and went. No Wilbur.

Mr. Beardsley got up and spoke to the audience. "According to our match agreement, Mr. Iverson may be a half-hour late before the game is officially forfeited."

The audience began buzzing and every once in a while I could hear something that sounded like "Flasher Fever."

Then Mary Lou, who is good at improvising, jumped up with her megaphone. She yelled

at the people, "Gimmie an 'F.'"

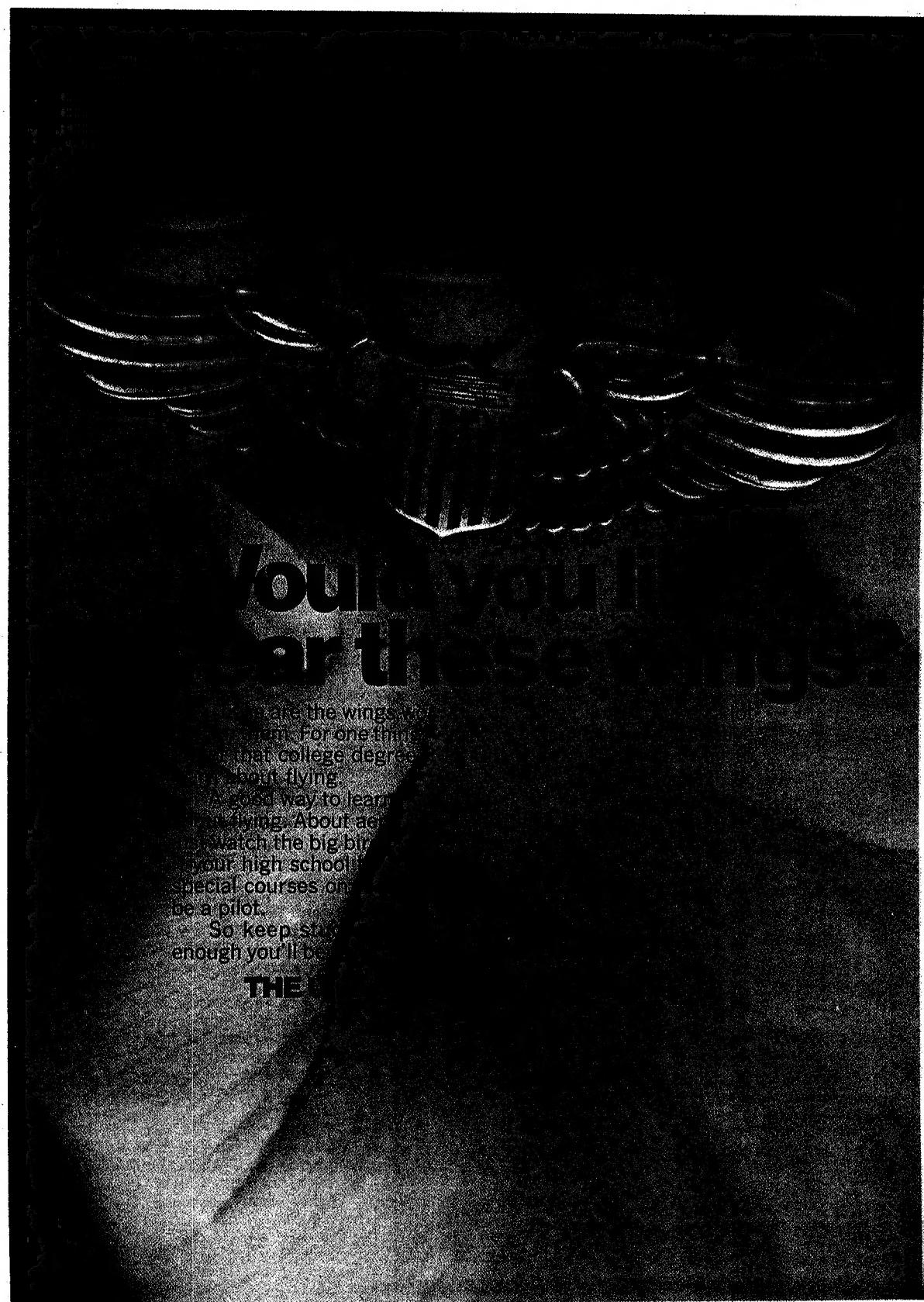
The audience gave her an "F."

"Gimmie an 'L.'"

She got the "L."

"Gimmie an 'A.'"

And so on, the finale →



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of which was "FLASHER FEVER, FLASHER FEVER, YEAAH!"

I looked away and sighed. What a waste of enthusiasm!

The Riverside cheerleaders tried a rebuttal, but all they could come up with was "HOLD THAT LINE" and "BLOCK THAT KICK."

At 25 minutes after two, the door on the other side of the stage opened and there stood Wilbur, on his crutches.

His right foot was taped, his left hand bandaged, he still had that black eye, and his nose was misty red.

He stared at me. "We had a flat tire on the way over." Then he started up the stairs.

He nearly made it, except that the tip of one of his crutches didn't quite clear the top step and he fell flat on his face.

I rushed over, but Wilbur, still lying there, held up a hand. "Don't you dare touch me! Haven't you done enough to me already?"

So Mr. Beardsley helped him up and got him seated at the chessboard.

Wilbur's face was pale and sweaty, his hands shook, and the truth of it is that he was scared silly, wondering what was going to happen to him next.

You had to admire the courage and intestinal fortitude, or stubbornness, that brought him here and, believe me, I really was impressed.

I would have clapped him on the shoulder but I was afraid I'd break something.

We drew for the White Queen and I got it. Which meant that I had the White pieces and the first move.

I moved P-K4.

The audience hummed and buzzed and I heard somebody say, "That's the typical Flasher opening."

Mr. Beardsley held up a big sign with the word "SILENCE" on one side of it. On the reverse side was "SHUT UP," so he had something in reserve if he needed it.

Wilbur's face was still pale and he stared at the pawn on K4 like it hypnotized him.

Finally he moved P-QB4.

I thought about it for a minute and then shoved my Knight to KB3.

Wilbur moved N-QB3.

I moved P-Q4 and he took it with his Pawn. Then I captured his Pawn with my Knight.

Wilbur didn't hesitate. He went P-K3.

I decided on N-N5.

Automatically he pushed a Pawn to Q3.

What would I do next? Why not B-KB4? And I did.

I was really going good and that surprised me. I decided to slow down the play a little. At this rate we'd be through in 10 minutes and people would probably think they weren't getting their money's worth.

But Wilbur wasn't hesitating at all on his turns. Was he being overconfident? Was he leading me into a trap?

He seemed to be playing in a trance. Yes, that was it. He was being held together by sheer guts, determination, and hysteria.

I glanced out at the audience. Everybody seemed interested enough except for one of the Riverside cheerleaders who had fallen asleep on her megaphone.

When we got to the 27th move, Wilbur and I exchanged Queens, but the move gave me a good positional advantage.

I was going to win.

I could feel it.

My 28th move was PxP. Wilbur would come back with B-R3, wouldn't he?

He did.

I shoved my Rook to R-5, which seemed the thing to do. He would come back with K-Q2.

He did.

I hesitated. What was going on here? Was I reading his mind or influencing him in some extrasensory perception type of way?

My Rook took his King's Pawn. He would move B-N2.

He did.

I frowned. Not only did I know I was going to win, but I also knew every move I was going to make from now on. Not only that, I knew what Wilbur would do too. On the 47th move, after my R-K1, Wilbur would resign. I would be left with two Rooks and two Pawns, and he with a Rook, a Bishop and one Pawn.

But how did I know that?

I suddenly knew why.

It was that phonograph record I'd been playing every night and this was the game where Fischer beat Najdorf in 1966. While I was asleep, the game had somehow grooved itself into my subconscious mind.

Something else came to me too.

Like Dad says, it takes two to tango. I couldn't be playing this Fischer game if Wilbur wasn't playing it too. The probabilities that he would make exactly the same moves as Najdorf were trillions to one or worse.

Then why was he playing Najdorf to my Fischer?

I looked him over again.

